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Imperial defence

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His Master's Voice

IMPERIAL DEFENCE

A SPEECH

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,

MAY 11, 1905

[WITH CORRECTIONS]

BY

THE RIGHT HON.

ARTHUR JAMES BALFOUR, M.P.

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.

39 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON

NEW YORK AND BOMBAY

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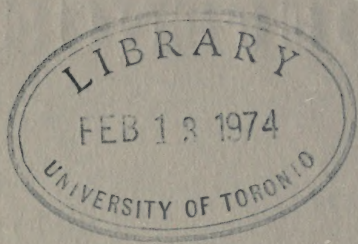
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NOTE

The corrections made in the text of this speech are considerable; but they affect its style and not (in any important particular) its substance.

A. J. B.

August 1905.

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IMPERIAL DEFENCE

*Speech delivered in the House of Commons
on May 11, 1905, on the Vote (Civil Service
Estimates) for the Treasury and Subordinate
Departments.*

MR. LOWTHER,—

IF I depart from the single precedent which we have to guide us on this vote, and begin our discussion by a Ministerial statement, it is because, having listened to the debates that have taken place earlier in the year on the subjects connected with the Navy and the Army, it seemed to me that the time had come when it became desirable, and even necessary, to give some connected account of our most important conclusions on the subject of Imperial Defence.

THE NATURE OF THE COMMITTEE.

I may, perhaps, fitly begin by endeavouring to remove a misconception which certainly has no justification in anything I have ever said or suggested, but which has taken deep root, and which I shall feel it to be my duty to contradict as often as I hear it reproduced. This error consists in supposing that the Committee of Defence is a new executive department

which has in some way the duty thrown upon it of supervising the work hitherto entrusted to the First Lord of the Admiralty and the Secretary of State for War. Now this is not the case. The Committee of Defence is not an executive body; and if it were executive, instead of being purely consultative, it would be in the highest degree inexpedient that it should attempt to deal with matters that are strictly departmental. If the Committee were to be treated as a Court of Appeal—and some hon. gentlemen have endeavoured so to treat it—against the decisions come to in their own departments either by the First Lord of the Admiralty or the Secretary for War, in the first place the Committee would be hopelessly overburdened, and, in the second place, the efficiency of the departments which it attempted thus to supervise would be destroyed, and the responsibility of the Ministers at the head of them would be absolutely shattered. Our functions are not, indeed, less important, but they are of a wholly different character from those which this particular class of critic supposes. It is not for us to advise, much less to determine, what type of battleship, armoured cruiser, or field gun should be adopted, or what military organisation or naval distribution should be accepted by the Government, by the House, and by the country. But, although such questions do not fall within our purview, I think that the longer our labours have gone on the more convinced is every Minister who sits on the Committee of the necessity of the work which it endeavours to carry out. I say that in no spirit of criticism of the Ministers who held office before the Committee came into existence, for

we ourselves were among those Ministers. I merely express a feeling which is, I believe, common to all of us. No doubt the sort of questions with which this Committee has to deal have in past times been entrusted to successive Committees, consisting of eminent sailors and soldiers, and in many cases with a strong civilian element. These Committees, however, kept no continuous record. They dealt with single and isolated subjects apart from their bearing on other questions. And it must be evident that a series of Committees appointed *ad hoc* is a very different thing from a single Committee enjoying a continuous existence, possessing a permanent staff, and leaving behind it complete records of its decisions, or indecisions, for the instruction and use of those who from time to time are called to the service of the Crown as responsible Ministers. That want is filled by this Defence Committee as it never could be filled by temporary committees; and I venture to go further and to repeat what I have said before—namely, that, as time goes on, our Colonies will share our discussions on those aspects of Imperial Defence in which they are specially concerned. I do not venture, indeed, to prophesy what Colonial developments may result from the creation of this Committee, but I cannot doubt that we have already been enabled to lay foundations on which a noble building may yet be erected.

THE PROBLEMS BEFORE THE COMMITTEE.

If, then, the functions of the Committee are neither executive nor departmental, what are they? They

may be roughly described as extra-departmental ; as concerned with the great problems of defence which lie beyond the province of any single department, and require the co-operation either of two or more offices at Whitehall ; or of the British Government and a Colonial Government ; or of the British Government and the Indian Government. Nobody who is at all acquainted with the history of the question of Indian defence (to take this portion of the Committee's work as an example) can fail to have been deeply impressed by the great lack, in past times, of some co-ordinating machinery of this kind. It is even difficult, with all the technical knowledge now available, and with all the advantages of our new machinery, for this Committee to work with reasonable rapidity through the complex problems which the Governments of India and of this country have to deal with on some common plan accepted by both. I need not say that the number of topics that come under one or other of these heads is very great. For instance, the question how the ports, commercial and other, of this country may best be defended is not one for the Army alone or for the Navy alone : it concerns them jointly ; and if they differ, how are their differences to be reconciled ? A permanent provision for attaining this object has now been supplied by the Committee of Defence ; and supplied for the first time. In this connection I may parenthetically point out that one result of our long and anxious deliberations on this subject is to reverse the hitherto accepted policy as to the advantage of defending our ports by the use of submarine mines. The Admiralty are of opinion, and the Committee of

Defence agree with them, that the submarine mine is, at all events as far as this country is concerned, an inexpedient method of attempting to secure the safety of our ports. It is a method more likely to produce injury to our naval or commercial interests than to those of the enemy. We consider that it is necessary to rely on other methods better suited to modern requirements and less dangerous to our shipping. Some hon. members may not have given attention to this subject, and I may therefore remind them that in speaking of submarine mines I am not referring to the blockade or automatic mines which are playing so important a part in the Far Eastern war now going on. In regard to the use of mines of this class, we shall not allow ourselves to fall behind what we understand are the measures taken by other nations ; but I cannot forbear expressing my opinion that the use of blockade mines is a subject that must and ought to come under the consideration of some international tribunal. The danger to neutrals which must result from sowing broadcast in the waterways of the world these undirected engines of destruction is so great that I do not think civilised mankind can in the future permit them to be used in a haphazard fashion.

This criticism, however, is by the way, for I propose to-day to direct my observations mainly to the broader issues of national defence, which I divide into the three branches of home defence, Colonial defence, and Indian defence; and the House will recognise that, when I mention these three great divisions, I cannot, from the very nature of the case, attempt to go into the numerous details that each

may suggest; and that I can only indicate in somewhat meagre outlines the conclusions at which the Committee of Defence have arrived.

HOME DEFENCE.

The first of these great divisions is home defence, and it is certainly the most important. If our home defence be insufficient, the British Empire may be a magnificent monument, but it rests on feet of clay. We are powerless to defend ourselves in far-off seas if the very centre and heart of the Empire is really open to serious invasion. But though every one must recognise that this is the central problem of Imperial and national defence, we see year after year the continuance of a profitless wrangle between the advocates of different schools of military and naval thought to which the puzzled civilian gives a perplexed attention, and which leaves in the general mind an uneasy sense that, in spite of the millions we are spending on the Navy and the Army, the country is not, after all, secure against some sudden onslaught which might shatter the fabric of Empire. This, be it remembered, is no new state of things. It reaches far back into a historic past. The same controversy in which we are now engaged was raging in the time of Drake; and then as now it was in the main the soldiers who took one side; in the main the sailors who took the other. The great generals in the sixteenth century believed the invasion of England possible, the great admirals did not believe it possible. If you go down the stream of time you come to an exactly similar state of things during the Napoleonic

wars. No man studying the facts can accept the hypothesis put forward by some historians that the materials, the men, and the ships which Napoleon assembled at Boulogne early in the last century were merely a feint to conceal his designs against some other Power. It is certain, therefore, that Napoleon believed invasion to be possible; and it is equally certain that Nelson believed it to be impossible. Forty years later you find the Duke of Wellington, in a very famous letter, expressing, in terms almost pathetic in their intensity, his fears of invasion—fears which naval opinion has never shared, provided our fleets be adequate. We found, when we took up the subject, that the perennial dispute was still unsettled; and it appeared to us—I do not say that full agreement could be come to, but—something nearer agreement than ever had been reached before, if we could avoid barren generalities, and devise a concrete problem capable of definite solution, yet based on suppositions so unfavourable to this country, that if, in this hypothetical case serious invasion was demonstrably impossible, we might rest assured that it need not further enter into our practical calculations. Following out this idea, we assumed that our regular army was abroad upon some oversea expedition, and that our organised fleets in permanent commission were absent from home waters. Frankly I do not see that we could be expected to go much further!

But it may fairly be asked, What exactly do you mean by the army being occupied in some oversea expedition, and what exactly do you mean when you say that your organised fleets are absent from home waters? How do you translate these two statements

into concrete figures? We thought that we could not be going far wrong as regards the army if we assumed our forces at home to have reached the lowest point touched during the South African War. As the House is aware, that war threw a strain upon our military resources quite unexpected in its magnitude, and it was at the end of February or the beginning of March 1900 that the strain was most felt. The actual state of the home army at that critical moment was as follows: 17,000 infantry and cavalry and twenty-six batteries of artillery constituted the whole Regular Force that we had at home in organised units. There were sixty battalions of Militia, and there were soldiers under age, soldiers ill, and soldiers insufficiently trained, who did not in any way constitute organised units. We had 141,000 Volunteers who would under the existing organisation be used for garrisons, and there were 85,000 Volunteers remaining. The number of Volunteers was large, but from the point of view of a field army they were not organised, and there was not in the country at that time any machinery for organising them. There was no proper staff, and there were no sufficient arrangements for immediately using them as a field army. Though no doubt, with sufficient notice, that organisation could have been to some extent improvised, it did not exist at the precise psychological moment to which I ask the House to direct its attention.

This, then, is the state of affairs we have in view when we suppose our Army to be absent on an oversea expedition. What, now, do we mean by saying that the Fleet is away—has wandered

off somewhere into space—and what degree of weakness in home waters does this hypothesis imply? I ought, perhaps, before answering my own question, to say that this idea of our organised fleets being lost in some distant ocean is a very extreme one; and it is not one which I can bring myself to pretend comes within the region of reasonable probability. But let us, for the sake of argument, take it that the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Channel Fleets are far away from these shores, incapable of taking any part in repelling invasion, though of course still constituting a menace to the communications of any invader fortunate or unfortunate enough to have effected a landing. What, then, would remain? Under the new Admiralty system we should have ready for sea in a comparatively few hours—I believe that six hours would be sufficient—six first-class battleships and six first-class cruisers now in reserve, kept ready to put to sea as soon as steam could be raised, and manned by crews specially trained to manœuvre and to fight them. In addition to these we should have in commission twelve cruisers, eleven torpedo gunboats, twenty-four destroyers, and twenty torpedo-boats, stationed in home waters; and in reserve, with nucleus crews ready for rapid action, six first-class battleships, nineteen cruisers of various classes, fifty-eight destroyers, and twenty-eight torpedo-boats.

That would be the naval position under the new system if and when our organised fleets were away. But even were our available strength what it was under the old system, the general argument I am about to advance would, in the opinion of the

Defence Committee, hold good—indeed, when I wrote the original memorandum on which this part of my speech is based, the new Admiralty plan was not in operation, and the reserve ships, though they existed, could not be counted on for a mobilisation so rapid that its duration must be measured not in days but in hours. I should add that I have omitted from my enumeration submarine boats, as to the value of which no doubt expert opinion may differ, but which, I believe, are destined to be of great importance, if not in naval warfare generally, yet in that part of naval and military warfare which consists in opposing an attempt to land soldiers in crowded transports upon a hostile coast.

I have now explained exactly what is meant by the assumption that our Army is abroad and our fleets absent from home waters. On this assumption, then, is serious invasion possible?

In order to reach a final conclusion we have next to deal with a military question, which may be formulated as follows: What is the smallest number of men with which, as a forlorn hope, invasion could be attempted? Observe, I say, “What is the smallest number of men?” That may seem a paradoxical way of putting the question, but it is the true way. We are apt, in estimating the defensive power of Great Britain, to compare the number of our soldiers with the number possessed by our great military neighbours, and to ask, “How can we hope to resist the masters of these innumerable legions if once they cross the narrow seas?” But, Sir, that is not the problem. The difficulty which our hypothetical invader has to face is not that of accumulating a

sufficient force on his own side of the water, but the difficulty of transferring it to ours ; and inasmuch as that difficulty increases in an increasing ratio with every additional transport required and every augmentation in the landing force, it becomes evident that the problem which a foreign general has to consider is not, "How many men would I like to have in England in order to conquer it?" but "With how few men can I attempt its conquest?" The answer which was given by Lord Roberts, and accepted by all the other military critics whom it was our duty to consult, was that it would not be possible to make the attempt with less than 70,000 men ; those men to be lightly equipped as regards artillery and as regards cavalry,—since horses and guns are the things which most embarrass officers responsible for transport, embarkation, and disembarkation. With a force even of this magnitude Lord Roberts was distinctly of opinion that for 70,000 men to attempt to take London—which is, after all, what would have to be done if the operation were in any sense to be conclusive—would be in the nature of a forlorn hope.

The Committee will see that we have now got one stage further in our investigation ; and the next and final question we have to ask is whether, in the absence of our fleets (as above explained) it is possible to land 70,000 men on these shores? But before dealing with this, the vital point to be determined, may I interpolate a parenthesis, which though not irrelevant, is a little outside the direct course of my argument. The problem of home defence, as I have endeavoured to state it, avoids the issue raised by the so-called "Blue Water" school. We do not

ask whether ships alone can provide a sufficient defence for our shores. We ask whether, in the absence of our organised fleets, the ships that remain will prevent the landing of a force sufficient to defeat such troops, regular and auxiliary, as remain when our armies are fighting oversea—a very different question. We assume land defences; we assume volunteers; we assume militia; we assume a residue of regulars. If this country were as helpless as, let us say, some island in the South Seas, where the inhabitants know not even the humblest arts of war, I suppose that 5000 men, if they could squeeze a way through the Navy, could march from end to end of the island, as white men have marched from end to end of Australia, unresisted by its aboriginal inhabitants. But, of course, that is a state of things which does not exist, and cannot exist. Some people are fond of putting this dilemma. Either the Navy can absolutely stop an invasion—if so, why do you ask anybody to learn the use of the rifle?—or else the Navy cannot stop an invasion, and then you must have a force at home competent to deal with a disciplined foreign force of unlimited magnitude. But those dilemmas are very misleading. The difficulty of invasion is primarily naval; the magnitude of the naval difficulty depends largely upon the size of the invading army which has to be convoyed to our shores and protected during disembarkation; the size of the invading army depends chiefly on the resistance it will meet with when they come to be landed; the resistance they will meet with depends on the number and efficiency of the troops who will be called on to resist them; so that an effective home

force is assumed in the very statement of the problem we are attempting to solve. However little I may personally believe in the possibility of evading the British Fleet, I do not ask any one else to be sceptical; I do not preach the pure doctrine of the "Blue Water" school; I ask no more than that, in discussing the dangers of invasion, we should base our reasoning on hypotheses which theorists of every school will admit to be so unfavourable to this country that if they exclude the possibility of invasion, invasion ought indeed to be impossible. I hope the House will agree with the Defence Committee in thinking that this at least has been accomplished.

I revert now to the question I asked a moment ago, namely, could 70,000 men in the absence of our organised fleets effect a landing on these shores? Since the days when a similar question was put by the contemporaries of Nelson and Wellington there have been great scientific discoveries, which all, I think, on the balance, make in favour of defence. I particularly notice two of them. One is steam, and the other is wireless telegraphy. When Napoleon was collecting his legions near Boulogne, the British Fleet was, of course, watching closely the French warships, on whose escort the whole plan of invasion depended. But it was no doubt possible for the panic-monger of those days to say, "If the British Fleet can reach the scene of action in time, no doubt they will defeat the expedition; but suppose a dead calm or a head wind prevent the Fleet from coming up, how do we know that Napoleon could not seize the opportunity of landing

a sufficient number of men to make resistance impossible?" I will not argue whether such a catastrophe could happen in those days or not; certainly it cannot happen now. Modern telegraphy makes it possible to convey orders. Steam makes it possible to obey them. Steam ensures the power of movement; it makes concentration at all times possible. It is not necessary now that our ships should be in port or near a land telegraph station, they need no longer keep in close touch with the shore; it is sufficient for the cruisers stationed in home waters always to remain within the range of wireless telegraphy in order to concentrate at any moment at the point of danger.

But there are two other modern inventions—the torpedo and the submarine—which must modify, in the interests of defence, the extreme doctrine of the command of the sea which used to be held, and perhaps is sometimes still held, by the so-called "Blue Water" school. In old days, the sea was the unchallenged possession of the fleet which had proved itself the most powerful. This can no longer be said without qualification. The development of torpedo warfare has made it perilous even for the most powerful fleet to approach an enemy's coast, especially by night. Doubtless the battleship remains, as ever, the most important support of sea-power; but I do not believe that any British admiral, even though our Fleets rode unchallenged in every part of the world, would view with serenity the task of convoying and guarding during hours of disembarcation and of darkness, a huge fleet of transports off a coast infested by submarines and torpedo craft.

A battleship can drive another battleship from the sea; it cannot drive a fast cruiser because a fast cruiser can always evade it. A strong and fast cruiser can drive a weak and slow cruiser from the sea; but neither cruisers nor battleships can drive from the sea, or from the coast, I ought rather to say, either submarines or destroyers possessing a safe shelter in neighbouring harbours. The reverse operation is indeed the more probable. These, Mr. Chairman, are great changes, and they are changes which nearly touch the particular problem on which I am asking the Committee to concentrate their attention—the problem whether it is possible, under the conditions named, to land 70,000 troops on these islands. To a more detailed consideration of this I now devote myself.

The first difficulty of the invader is the provision of sufficient transport. And, in order to see how great this difficulty is, we must take a concrete case, and manifestly our most instructive case is that of France. As our problem is a problem of invasion, I am bound to take as our potential invader the great nation which is nearest to us, and from which invasion would be most easy. I need not tell the House that the last thing in the world I regard as possible is an attempt at invasion by France, but everybody will agree that if our general conclusions are to be illustrated at all, it is France that must supply the illustration.

How, then, is France going to get transport for 70,000 men? If it is by long and open preparation, then our hypothesis of absent fleets becomes almost too extravagant to be practical. Can it, then, be

by a sudden effort? On a particular day in last year, taken at random, it appears that there were in French ports on the Channel and on the Atlantic steamers of about 100,000 tons under the French flag. I do not quite see how the French Government could count on immediately collecting many more than the ships they actually had in port at the time. If an embargo were laid on British shipping in French ports, the secret would be out, and great difficulties and delays must result from the clearing of the ships and the replacement of masters, engineers and crews. But 100,000 tons is absolutely insufficient to carry 70,000 men. The calculation that the Admiralty favour is that for such a force you would require 250,000 tons. I am informed, however, that some experiments made by French authorities a year or two ago indicate that perhaps that estimate may be too high, and that it would be possible, by limiting horses and transport vehicles, to carry out the operation with 210,000 tons. I do not know whether the right hon. baronet the member for the Forest of Dean differs from that calculation.

SIR C. DILKE.—I only say the Turks send all their reinforcements on a very different scale.

MR. BALFOUR.—If the right hon. baronet takes that view——

SIR C. DILKE.—I am not offering it as an argument; I do not differ from the argument.

MR. BALFOUR.—I am dealing with the information supplied to me by those in whom I have confidence, and who, I think, are well qualified to judge, and they are clearly of opinion that 210,000 tons is a low estimate of the amount of tonnage

required for purposes of invasion. Whether they be right or whether they be wrong, it is plain that the steam tonnage in the Atlantic and Channel ports of France at any given moment is wholly insufficient to carry the required number of men. I do not believe it would carry more than half.

Assume, however, for the sake of argument, that the transport were procured, and assume, further, that the difficulty of collecting them in one harbour* were overcome, what harbour would be chosen? The nearest harbour available is Cherbourg, which is a very bad harbour in which to arrange a surprise, since it is entirely exposed to view, and no operations of the kind we are supposing could be carried on in secrecy. Brest would offer very much better facilities. Does the right hon. gentleman agree with me? (Sir C. DILKE.—Hear, hear.) But then Brest is about twice as far as Cherbourg from any place where a landing is likely to be attempted, and every mile you add to the distance to be traversed

* It has been alleged that this concentration in one French harbour would not take place, but that the invaders would start from many ports and concentrate on the British coast. The following extract from the original memorandum laid before the Defence Committee touches on this point: “. . . this transport would be scattered along the whole north coast of France, and it must evidently be collected in one or at most two ports before it could be utilised. An attempt to embark the expeditionary force in separate fractions corresponding to the amount of shipping which happened to be found at each of the dozen Channel ports on the day when war was declared would be suicidal—if for no other reason because such tactics would subject them to the danger of being dealt with in detail by British destroyers and cruisers, whose speed would enable them to concentrate on any division of the slow-moving convoy which seemed least efficiently protected.”

increases the danger of the transit. It would be quite impossible to transport 70,000 men from Brest, or even from Cherbourg, in daylight. Some hours of darkness there must be, in which no convoy could give adequate protection against resolute torpedo attack ; and to such attack they would most certainly be subjected. Long before they reached our coasts the alarm would have spread from the Faroe Islands to Gibraltar, and every ship available, every cruiser, destroyer, torpedo-boat, down to the smallest craft that could be turned to account would be concentrated at the menaced shore.

Let us, however, assume that this huge convoy has escaped attack on its voyage, and has reached our shores in safety ; what then ? Disembarking 70,000 men on a coast such as that between Portsmouth and Dover is not an easy operation ; above all, it is not a quick operation. I do not believe anybody will estimate the time it would take at less than forty-eight hours. My advisers inform me that such an estimate is sanguine for calm weather, and that in rough weather the task would be impossible. Forty-eight hours means two days and two nights : two opportunities, that is to say, for the submarine and two for the destroyer. How does anybody imagine that this fleet of undrilled transports, unprovided with nets (since nets can only be used by ships which are structurally devised to carry them), how is it possible that this helpless mass of transports could escape the attacks of these coast-defence vessels even if unsupported by the force of battleships, cruisers, and other craft always to be found in our ports ? The thing is surely impossible. Conceive the position of the invad-

ing soldiers—the pick, no doubt, of the invader's army. They would not be asked to fight for glory on a stricken field. But, close packed in transports, commanded by captains ignorant of war, not knowing when, or where, or how the threatened attack would take effect, knowing only that if it did take effect they could not strike a blow in self-defence, these helpless battalions would be required to await their fate. I do not know whether we have the right to measure the courage of our opponents by our own, or the readiness of their leaders to take responsibility by that of British officers; but I am certain there is no admiral in our Fleet who would willingly undertake a task such as I have endeavoured to describe. No British Admiral would regard the convoying of vessels carrying 70,000 men across at least seventy-five miles of sea, and their subsequent protection for two days and two nights in positions not only fixed, but perfectly ascertained, in waters swarming with torpedo craft and submarines, as other than the enterprise of a lunatic. And what a British Admiral would regard as insane is scarcely likely to be considered as practicable by sailors of other nations.

Though I have been obliged to omit many points of importance, I think I have now said enough to show that we have really endeavoured to put to ourselves the problem of serious invasion in a very concrete form. We have not confined ourselves to generalities about the command of the sea or the superiority of our Fleet, important as are these aspects of the question; but we have striven to frame a clear issue: we have framed it on suppositions most unfavourable to this country, and we have convinced ourselves, and

I trust have convinced the House, that even on these suppositions, unfavourable as they are, serious invasion of these islands is not a possibility which we need consider.

COLONIAL DEFENCE.

I have now finished the first branch of the task which I set myself. I will deal very briefly with the second, which I have, perhaps misleadingly, described as Colonial defence. In truth, the *general* question of Colonial defence against European aggression is purely maritime, and presents no special difficulties so long as we retain command of the sea. It is not complicated, as is the question of home defence, by the real or supposed possibility of surprise. Nor is it complicated, like the question of Indian defence, by the possibility of invasion by land. Nevertheless, certain changes in the condition of naval warfare, and in the distribution of foreign sea-power, have required the Committee to consider and decide naval and military questions in which Colonial interests are involved, and on these it may be proper that I should briefly speak to-day.

The principle on which we have proceeded may be summarised by saying that, as the British Fleet and the British Army should be available for the defence of the British Empire in all parts of the world, our force should be as far as possible concentrated round the centre from which it could best be distributed, as necessity arose, to that part of the Empire which stood most in need of it. I have to acknowledge that this has rendered unprofitable some expenditure

which has been undertaken under a different view of our needs. I mention that because it is a subject which has occupied the attention of the right hon. member for the Forest of Dean. The most notable case is that of St. Lucia. The general problem of the defence of "British possessions and commerce abroad" was last considered as a whole by a strong Commission, of which Lord Carnarvon was the head, and it was in deference to Lord Carnarvon's recommendation that St. Lucia was made a naval base. One of the reasons for making it a naval base was that it was only some forty miles from the French naval station in those seas. But that which was a reason for making a base at St. Lucia in Lord Carnarvon's time is a reason for not making a base there now. For now we have to take into account the development of the torpedo-boat. It is a distinct disadvantage for any harbour required as a place of repair, refitting, and refreshment that it should be within reach of torpedo attack by a potentially hostile Power. But there are yet other grounds for the abandonment of St. Lucia. The Defence Committee do not think that West Indian waters are likely in the future to be the theatre of great naval operations; and even if this opinion should prove ill-founded, we believe that for the accommodation of modern battle-ships St. Lucia is not so well suited as Jamaica or Trinidad. For its harbour, though sheltered, is not very convenient; nor could it easily hold a large fleet.

These are the reasons why St. Lucia can no longer be regarded as a naval station. And they are in harmony, if not with the specific recommendations, yet with the general principles laid down by Lord Carnarvon's

Commission—namely, that we should cease to scatter our forces in small isolated bodies throughout the world, and that we should concentrate them in important tactical units, keep them under our hand, and be able to use them in places where they would be most likely to control the hostile forces of any enemy we may have to oppose. Trincomali is the only other fortified harbour which we no longer propose to use as such. It was not recommended for fortification as a naval station by Lord Carnarvon's Commission, and the Admiralty, which has only kept some stores there, no longer requires that it should be maintained. The dockyard establishment at Bermuda is to be reduced to a nucleus, which of course will not prevent the place being utilised if the need should arise. The garrison will also be diminished. There will no longer be any white infantry in the West Indies, where their duties have practically been those of police, and where the facilities for military training are extremely limited. I have left Halifax and Esquimalt to the last. These fortified ports will be handed over to Canada at the request of her Government, which is prepared to undertake responsibilities for defence accepted some years ago by Australia.

THE DEFENCE OF INDIA.

I pass from these aspects of Colonial defence to the question of India. The invasion of India has been the dream of many military dreamers in the past, and the nightmare of many Governments in this country. Napoleon seems to have believed in

its possibility—and to have retained his belief even after the French force in Egypt had been hopelessly isolated. The Emperor Paul had a plan for accomplishing it; and what these two very unequal authorities hoped has been feared by successive British Administrations. We have endeavoured, quite in vain, by diplomatic arrangement to prevent that Russian expansion which I will neither justify nor criticise, but which we have now to take as an accomplished fact; and I think we must admit that the anxieties of our predecessors, though in one sense unreasonable, had yet, in another sense, a real foundation in truth and fact. They were unreasonable because the idea of invading India from the Caspian with a large force, but without railways, was, I believe, totally illusory. They were reasonable because the steady progress of Russia towards the borders of Afghanistan and the construction of strategic railways abutting on or closely adjoining the Afghan frontier, which that progress has made possible, place the military situation in the East on a wholly new footing. We must, therefore, in all seriousness consider the situation thus created, and endeavour soberly to estimate what can and cannot be done by our great neighbour in the Middle East; not, of course, because we need suppose an invasion of India probable; not because it forms any part of the policy of the Russian Government; but because, where national defence is concerned, even the improbable must be taken into account.

The new military elements to be reckoned with in the case are, as I have said, the strategic lines of railway, building or built; but an exaggerated import-

ance may easily be attached to them, important as they are, by those who read too hastily the lessons of the war now raging in Manchuria. In Manchuria there is but a single line of railway, connecting a great Russian army with its bases. It might at first sight seem that, with two lines of railway, something like double that army could be maintained on the frontier of India. But I need not tell the House that is not the case. The Manchurian railway has, throughout all the vicissitudes of the war, reached to the front of the Russian position wherever that may have been. The Russians have never, therefore, been obliged to operate far in advance of their rail-head; and, moreover, their operations have been carried out in a region peculiarly rich in food, forage, and animal transport. In Afghanistan both conditions would be absent. The railways have yet to be made, and the resources of the country are insignificant.

The House is well aware that, speaking very broadly, the invasion of India is only likely to take place through Kabul on the north-east or Kandahar on the south-west. There are, of course, other lines which have to be considered. Small bodies might penetrate north-east of Kabul through the almost impassable mountains of the Hindu Kush, and it is conceivable that another force might come through Seistan and Baluchistan on the south; but lest I should unnecessarily complicate the problem, the House will perhaps permit me to assume—what, I think, nobody will deny—that the two main lines of advance will be through either Kandahar or Kabul, or both.

MR. GIBSON BOWLES.—Through Kandahar.

MR. BALFOUR.—My hon. friend's opinion is a

very natural one, but I am not absolutely sure it is correct, and I will tell the House why. It is much easier, no doubt, to continue the Russian railway system from the Kushk Post through Herat to Kandahar than to adopt the Kabul line of advance, where railway construction in time of war would encounter almost insuperable difficulties. But supposing a British force repulsed at Kandahar and defeated at Quetta, suppose a Russian advance successfully made along the route which my hon. friend thinks the easiest, I must remind him that, having victoriously traversed the Bolan Pass, the invading army would yet be in a most unfavourable position for a further attack upon India. It would find itself far from its base, with the Indus still to cross, with an impassable desert beyond the river, in a very sparsely populated country, where our railways give us the power of concentrating troops both from the Panjab on the north and from Karachi on the south. These are no trifling obstacles; and it may well be that the invader of the future will desire to follow the example of his predecessors in the past, and will hazard the immense difficulties of a route which leads direct to the heart of India rather than waste his efforts on the apparently easier approach by Kandahar and Quetta. It is, on the other hand, true that the modern invader, if he is to attack in force, can only do so by the help of railways, and that making a railway from the Oxus to Kabul is a most tremendous operation. There are no less than two hundred miles of mountain, where rock-cutting and other engineering operations of great difficulty, carried on at elevations frequently exceeding 10,000 ft. above the sea-level, would have

to be undertaken. The Afghans are not likely to welcome these railway makers in their fastnesses. No such enterprise is likely to be permitted in time of peace, or to be easily effected in time of war. Doubtless the Amir would find it impossible to resist the attacks of the disciplined forces of Russia in the plains north of the Hindu Kush ; but the Afghans would become very formidable opponents indeed when the approach was made to their mountains, and when they had obtained, as they certainly would obtain, the assistance of the British in preserving their independence.

The House may, perhaps, be of opinion that I have overstated the necessity of railway communication for any large army attempting either to attack or to defend Afghanistan and India ; but I will mention one concrete fact which I think conclusively proves my case. Lord Roberts informed the Defence Committee that during the eight or nine months in which he occupied Kabul in 1879-80 he had the utmost difficulty in feeding a force which on the average did not exceed 12,000 men. Unlike Manchuria, Afghanistan is a country poor both in food-stuffs and transport. Invading armies cannot live upon it. They must bring from elsewhere all that their troops require, and they must provide from elsewhere all the machinery for bringing it. It is, therefore, quite inconceivable that any large bodies of men should come into collision at an early stage of a war between Russia and ourselves. In fact, the problem of Indian defence is precisely the converse of the problem of British defence. An attack on these islands, impossible as I think it under any circumstances, is

only conceivable if it is something in the nature of a surprise. No surprise is possible in the case of India. It cannot be taken by sudden assault. The issue of the struggle will not turn so much on the relative numbers of the contending armies as on the success with which transport can be provided for conveying them and their supplies to the front.

It follows from considerations such as these that, in trying to estimate at what period of a war between the two countries there could first be a collision between their main forces, the determining factor is the rapidity of railway construction. I do not pretend that this question has been exhaustively discussed by Lord Kitchener, the Indian Government, and ourselves, and therefore I have no definite conclusion on it to offer to the House. I regret this; because, after all, on the answer to it depends, not, perhaps, the number of men which would be required for Indian defence, but the period within which they would be required. It is unfortunate that we have necessarily to discuss these difficult subjects by correspondence. I cannot help feeling that, if we had Lord Kitchener on this side of the water for three weeks we could do more to settle all outstanding problems than we can do in three months by telegrams and letters. But, though I am thus precluded from offering on behalf of the Defence Committee any precise estimate of the numbers of which our earlier reinforcements should consist, or the dates at which they would be required, I may say that Lord Kitchener is of opinion that, in addition to drafts, there should be available in the relatively early stages of a war, which, if it is to be conclusive, must

certainly be long, eight divisions of infantry and corresponding numbers of other arms. I am sure that Lord Kitchener's demands are not too great. But what I am not sure of is the exact time after the outbreak of war at which it would be necessary to fulfil them. That is the doubtful point. But, even taking the most pessimistic view, it is quite impossible for me to believe that more than the force I have named could be required in the first twelve months of hostilities.

The inference which the House will draw, and will be justified in drawing, from all this is that the first strain of war, though heavy, will not be overwhelming. But it must be observed that even this comparatively satisfactory conclusion only holds good so long as we maintain undiminished the difficulties which an invading force would have to overcome. As transport is the greatest of those difficulties, we must not allow anything to be done which would facilitate transport. In my opinion, any attempt to build Russian strategic railways within Afghan territory should be regarded as a direct menace to this country. I have not the smallest ground for believing that the Russian Government intend, either now or at any future time, to make such railways. But I say that, if the attempt were made, innocuous as it might at first sight appear, it would be the heaviest blow to the security of our Indian Empire that could well be conceived. If this country is prepared resolutely to say that railways in Afghanistan shall only be made in time of war, and as an incident in warlike operations, then I think it is not at all beyond the military power of this country, without any such

fundamental reorganisation of its forces as would be implied by the adoption of conscription, to make our Eastern possessions as secure as are our Colonies or our own shores. If, however, by laxity, by blindness, or by cowardice, we permit the slow absorption of the Afghan kingdom as we have necessarily permitted the absorption of the Khanates in Central Asia; if Russian strategic railways are allowed to creep dangerously close to our own immediate frontier, then this country will inevitably pay for its supineness by having to preserve a continental possession by rivalling continental armies. Foresight and courage will obviate these dangers. Without foresight and without courage they will surely come upon us; and when they come, either we or our children will perforce be compelled to solve the greatest military problem that has ever confronted the Government of this country.

I most sincerely apologise to the Committee for the long time which this statement has occupied. But I am not sure, looking back upon what I have said, that I could with advantage have cut down my remarks within narrower limit. I am indeed painfully aware that from any speech, dealing with so vast a subject, much that is of first-rate importance must perforce be omitted. I shall be content if I have indicated in outline our main conclusions on Home Defence, on Naval and Military concentration for the preservation of our oversea possessions, and last, but not least, on the strategic position of that great dependency which is now for the first time threatened by the close proximity to its borders of one of the great military monarchies of the world.

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